

University of Wollongong Research Online

Faculty of Arts - Papers (Archive)

Faculty of Arts, Social Sciences & Humanities

2009

Brave new world: Myth and migration in recent Asian-Australian picture books

Wenche Ommundsen
University of Wollongong, wenche@uow.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/artspapers>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ommundsen, Wenche, Brave new world: Myth and migration in recent Asian-Australian picture books
2009, 220-226.
<https://ro.uow.edu.au/artspapers/235>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

*Brave new world:
Myth and migration in recent Asian-Australian picture books*

Wenche Ommundsen

Copyright ©2009 Wenche Ommundsen. This text may be archived and redistributed both in electronic form and in hard copy, provided that the author and journal are properly cited and no fee is charged

Abstract: From Exodus to the American Dream, from Terra Nullius to the Yellow Peril to multicultural harmony, migration has provided a rich source of myth throughout human history. It engenders dreams, fears and memories in both migrant and resident populations; giving rise to hope for a new start and a bright future, feelings of exile and alienation, nostalgia for lost homelands, dreams of belonging and entitlement, fears of invasion, dispossession and cultural extinction. It has inspired artists and writers from the time of the Ancient Testament to the contemporary age of globalisation and mass migration and it has exercised the minds of politicians from Greek and Roman times to our era of detention centres and temporary visas. This reading of Asian-Australian picture books will focus on immigrants' perception of the 'new worlds' of America and Australia. *The Peasant Prince*, a picture-book version of Li Cunxin's best-selling autobiography *Mao's Last Dancer*, sets up tensions between individual ambition and belonging, illustrated by contrasts between the Chinese story 'The Frog in the Well' and the Western fairy-tale of Cinderella, to which Li Cunxin's own trajectory from poor peasant boy in a Chinese village to international ballet star is explicitly related. Shaun Tan's *The Lost Thing* and *The Arrival* trace the journey from alienation to belonging by means of fantasy worlds encompassing both utopic and dystopic visions. By way of a conclusion, the paper considers the nature of myth as evoked and dramatised in these texts, contrasting the idea of myth as eternal truth with Roland Barthes' insistence that myth is a mechanism which transforms history into nature.

Keywords: Myths of migration, Picture books, Asian-Australian writing

From Exodus to the American Dream, from Terra Nullius to the Yellow Peril to multicultural harmony, migration has provided a rich source of myth throughout human history. It engenders dreams, fears and memories in both migrant and resident populations; giving rise to hope for a new start and a bright future, feelings of exile and alienation, nostalgia for lost homelands, dreams of belonging and entitlement, fears of invasion, dispossession and cultural extinction. It has inspired artists and writers from the time of the Ancient Testament to the age of globalisation and mass migration and it has exercised the minds of politicians from Greek antiquity to our era of detention centres and temporary visas. To locate my reading of recent stories of migration by two Asian-Australian writers, I start by a reminder of one of the most influential myths of migration in modern times:

THE NEW COLOSSUS

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Emma Lazarus' powerful statement, engraved at the base of the Statue of Liberty, offers the wretched of the earth new hopes of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Her vision of the new world as a refuge for the exiles the old has obtained mythic status as the American Dream – a dream ritually evoked though not always confirmed by legislation and social practice.

In Australia, a pale and less poetically stirring echo of the new world's pledge to its migrant arrivals has found its way into the national anthem:

For those who've come across the seas
We've boundless plains to share

As in the US, but with different inflections and different challenges, the Australian national consciousness was originally conceived of, and remains, as a nation of migrants; the kind of migrant, and their mode of belonging, have been issues of debate and contestation throughout the nation's short history.

Li Cunxin, *The Peasant Prince*

As suggested by the title of the picture-book version of Li Cunxin's autobiography *Mao's Last Dancer*, his life reads like a fairytale. The story begins:

Some time ago, in a remote village in northern China, a small peasant boy
lived with his parents and six brothers in a tiny brick house. They were very
poor. (n.p.)

Born in 1961, Li entered school at the time of the Cultural Revolution. At 11 he was selected as a peasant student to Madame Mao's Dance Academy in Beijing. Initially showing little promise, he worked his way up to become the star student of the Academy, and was selected for a scholarship to the US. He later returned to dance with the Houston Ballet and eventually defected, causing a diplomatic rift between China and the US. He went on to become an international ballet star, dancing with some of the

world's greatest companies. He married an Australian ballerina, Mary McKendry, and spent the final years of his dancing career as principal artist with the Australian Ballet. When he retired he became a stockbroker. His autobiography, published in 2003, was a best-seller. It has been rewritten in two different versions for children (Li 2005 and 2007) and is currently being made into a film. Li lives in Melbourne and is in strong demand on the motivational speaker circuit.

A central place in the account of the young boy's growing consciousness of the world is the story of the frog in the well, told by his father. In the picture book it reads as follows:

Once upon a time, a little frog lived in a deep, dark well. It was its only home. One day, he met a frog from the world above.
'Come down and play with me!' begged the frog in the well.
The frog from the world above laughed. 'My world up here is much bigger!' The frog in the well was very annoyed, so he told his father what he'd heard.
'My son,' his father said with a sad heart, 'I have heard there is a bigger and better world up there. But our life is here, in the well. There is no way we can get out.'
'I want to see what is out there!' cried the little frog. But even though he jumped and hopped, the well was just too deep.
'It is no use, my son,' said his father.
'I have tried all my life to get out.'
Still, the little frog kept on trying to escape from that deep, dark well...
(n.p.)

The tension between the desire to see the big world and resignation to one's allotted smaller place structures the narrative throughout. In the adult version, the danger of wanting what one cannot have is given stronger emphasis by the father frog: 'Be satisfied with what you have, or it will cause you such misery in life.' (53) This tension later echoes in the boy's competing desires: to be with his family or to further his career away from them. He chooses his career, freedom, and America, but is tormented by longing for his family. Their later reunions, both when his parents visit the US and during his later visits to China, are described as his happiest moments.

The picture book omits another formative story from Li's childhood, that of Brave Hero the cricket, who sacrifices himself for the sake of his family. As it happens, Li's decision to defect to the US potentially means the sacrifice of his family, as they might have been punished in his stead. The narrator, instead, insists on the benefits his family derives from his success. The political dimension of his conflict is included in an appendix 'About Li's China' in the picture book, which tells of hardships and political repression under Mao; in the adult version there are detailed descriptions of deprivation and political indoctrination. America is seemingly devoid of political agendas: *Mao's Last Dancer* makes frequent use of the word *freedom* but does not elaborate of what this freedom implies. Li's defection is presented as motivated by love for his first wife, and the intervention of Barbara Bush, mother of the current US president, as a personal favour rather than a political gesture. In *The Peasant Prince*, the migrant story is a Cinderella-type, rags-to-riches account which confirms the American Dream in an

almost feature-less America: in order to represent the land of freedom and opportunity it must be presented as a benevolent neutrality.

Shaun Tan, *The Lost Thing*

Unlike Li Cunxin's account of migration, Shaun Tan's books focus primarily on the migrant's encounter with a host society. *The Lost Thing* is not explicitly about migration at all, though it is about belonging and not belonging, and reading the lost thing of the title as a figure for the lonely, displaced and unwanted migrant is offered as a strong possibility (see Dudek 2006). The story is about a young boy who, in a grim urban-industrial landscape comes across a lost thing, an incongruous hybrid between a crab and a furnace, and tries to find out where it belongs. Nobody claims it and he takes it home, but his parents tell him to get rid of it. He takes it to the government 'Department of Odds and Ends' where a helpful worker suggests that he instead seek out a secret place marked by a squiggly arrow. Identified as UtQIA, this place contains large numbers of odd creatures going about their business undisturbed by the rest of the world. The lost thing seems to like the place and the boy leaves it there and returns to his own humdrum life a city populated by zombie-like people obsessed with order and bureaucratic obfuscation.

The Lost Thing is a many-layered, visually and verbally inventive text which cannot be pinned down to a single reading. Several visual clues point to Australia as its primary referent: parodies of well-known Australian paintings such as Jeffrey Smart's *Cahill Expressway*, John Brack's *Collins Street 5pm*, or Edward Hopper's *Early Sunday Morning*. Two alternative visions of Australia are offered. One is clearly marked as dystopic: a grim, cheerless, uniform and unwelcoming cityscape. The other by contrast has utopian potential: 'a delightfully implausible, otherworldly landscape, where all the elements appear to exist in a state of harmonious chaos.' (Mallan 2005) Debra Dudek (2006) reads this contrast as alternative models for Australia's treatment of racially different migrants.

Shaun Tan, *The Arrival*

Shan Tan's next book, *The Arrival* is not so much a picture book as a graphic novel. It is wordless, telling the story by means of pictures in the form of a photo album, in which sepia tones, clothing and artefacts point to an early-20th century setting. The photo-realism of the character portrayal is in sharp contrast to the fantasy elements of the flora, fauna and cityscapes of the new world. *The Arrival*, according to one reviewer, 'tells not an immigrant's story, but the immigrant's story' (Yang 2007) – it is archetypal in its representation of loss, displacement, bewilderment and gradual accommodation within a new community. The main story depicts a man escaping an indefinite threat in the form of a dragon-like creature circling a bleak, forbidding city. He bids his wife and daughter farewell and travels by train and ship to a city of weird sky-scrapers, giant statues and incomprehensible signs. Initially lonely and lost, he is eventually befriended and helped by other migrants, who tell their own stories of escape from war, persecution and deprivation. Over time, he manages to save enough to bring his family out to join him, and the story ends on a family reunion, and on the image of his daughter helping another lost migrant find her way in the bewildering city. The universality of the migrant theme is underscored by the ethnic variety in the portrait gallery on the front and back inner covers. Shaun Tan has explained that he took his inspiration from

museums of immigration and the history of Ellis Island but also from the experience of his own father, who came to Australia from Malaysia in 1960 (Tan 2008). Some images clearly point to New York in the early years of the 20th century, but there are also allusions to Australia, particularly in Tan's reworking of the famous Tom Roberts painting *Coming South*.

The New World, as depicted in *The Arrival*, is an altogether more welcoming place than the bleak city of *The Lost Thing*. Because of the migrants' baggage of suffering and loss, and the difficulty in finding their way in what seems a totally alien universe, migration is portrayed as a traumatic experience, but the overwhelming feeling is one of hope: there is genuine companionship between migrants of different backgrounds and even the bewildering cityscape and outlandish creatures turn out to be benevolent. Once deciphered, this is a place where dreams can come true, whether American, Australian or universal.

Myth and History

To conclude, I want to take a closer look at the mythic dimension of the migrant stories considered here. According to one conception of myth, it is the domain of archetypal stories and eternal truths, the point where the particular and the universal come together to reveal deep knowledge about human life unchanged by culture and history. Thus, the Cinderella tale, which exists in practically every culture, is an expression of human longing for a better life, for fulfilment and happiness, and its enactment through the American Dream or through numerous stories of migrant hardship, perseverance and success, strike deep chords in readerships across all age groups and historical circumstances. The problem with such readings of myth is what they tend to leave out. Human suffering may be universal, but there is nothing 'generic' about the Cultural Revolution, and the migrant histories of America and Australia are distinct and offer huge variations: ballet stars and boat people do not have the same experience, a Malaysian Chinese coming to Australia today would encounter a society quite different from that of the 1960s. It is perhaps not so much the myths themselves, but the way they are read, that can lead to sweeping generalisations about matters that need to be understood in their historical specificities. In the case of children's literature, often read, and taught, as valuable lessons about the real world, there is to my view a dangerous tendency to disregard the difference between myth and reality and to read the most distinctive feature of myth, its fantasy element, as transparent allegory or thinly disguised fact.

In Shaun Tan's *The Lost Thing*, the boy and his lost charge visit the marvellously depicted 'Department of Odds and Ends', whose Latin motto reads: 'Sweepus Underum Carpetae.' This could also be the motto for another reading practice: what objects, facts, troublesome historical realities have been swept under the carpet in order for myths to be read as universally true? Roland Barthes' very different conception of myth is a useful point of departure for such an analysis. 'There are no eternal myths,' he writes in his well-known essay 'Myth Today'; myth is instead defined as a 'type of speech' or 'second-order semiological system' determined by history (Barthes 1973). Myth is depoliticised speech, transforming history into nature; it is precisely, it would seem, the mechanism by which the social, cultural and political processes which shape our reality are swept under the carpet to produce the orderly stories we tell about our world.

Reading *The Peasant Prince* with a view to the realities overshadowed by its mythic sweep, we may question its insistence on family values against evidence of overarching personal ambition. In particular we may wish to compare the account of political indoctrination in China with the total absence of any analysis of America's political climate, or even take the liberty of highlighting Li's connection to the Bush family to compare his use of the word 'freedom' to the rhetoric of the current US president when justifying, for example, the war in Iraq. We may question his story's legitimacy as a version of the American Dream given his hugely privileged position as a migrant of exceptional talent. We may wonder at the near-total absence of any reference to his subsequent migration to Australia. We may ask what role the preconceptions of the target (Western) readership for Li's book played in shaping the story.

Shan Tan's work is more resistant to easy deconstruction of its messages. His texts delight in paradox and playful complexity: a later Roland Barthes would refer to them as writerly as opposed to Li's readerly narrative (Barthes 1970). The question is more whether, and how, such books can teach young readers about the world. What 'truths', if any, do they have to offer about the life of migrants, in America, in Australia, a century ago and today? There is no doubt about the explicit allusions: the barely readable 'What about the Howard government?' as an illustration of 'a perfect vacuum' in *The Lost Thing*, and teasing reminders of John Howard's ideal a 'relaxed and comfortable' society.¹ But these allusions are often ambiguous. Is UtöqIA really offered as a utopic alternative to the dystopic city in *The Lost Thing*, as both Mallan and Dudek suggest, or does the odd spelling also hint at other, less hopeful readings: if this is a vision of multicultural Australia, could the refuge for misfits instead be read as a kind of 'ethnic zoo', or even a detention centre? In *The Arrival*, a close look at Tan's version of *Coming South* reveals that the migrants are different from those in Tom Roberts' original: gone are the pastel colours, the bonnets, the elaborate gowns and the relaxed attitudes. Tan's ship is more crowded, his migrants are covering themselves in shawls, huddled against hostile elements. Unlike Roberts' English settlers, they are poor: their search for a new life is motivated by desperation, not adventure. In this sense they are more truly like the 'homeless, tempest-tost' masses of Lazarus' poem. In fact, the inhabitants of the promised land in *The Arrival* are all refugees of some kind, and Tan's migrant portrait gallery is dominated by ethnic minorities. Representatives of dominant Anglo mainstreams are nowhere to be found, nor are there any comfortable economic or business migrants of the kind that outnumber all other categories in the current migrant intake of both the US and Australia. The new world of *The Arrival*, for all its semblance of photo-realist characterisation, is offered as a migrant dream, a fantasy which, in my reading, is much more utopian than the secret refuge for misfits in *The Lost Thing*. It is a world dominated by cultural difference but socio-economic sameness and solidarity: a community of strangers bonding through shared experience of hardship. It is nothing like America, or Australia, in the past or today.

Shaun Tan's verbal and visual heteroglossia reward sophisticated reading practices. Tan has himself questioned the assumption that picture books are only for children. (Tan n.d.), but they are *also* for children, which again raises the question of how they should be read. Reading his utopic/dystopic fantasy worlds as allegories which can easily be translated into ideals for lived reality is a temptation I would prefer to avoid. Learning to read myth as myth, gaining a deeper understanding of how myth informs the imagination which in turn underpins our construction of reality, is a greater challenge

but a much more productive practice if we want to teach ourselves, and younger readers, to read for cultural understanding as well as cultural difference.

References

- Barthes, R. *Mythologies*. A. Lavers (trans). New York: Hill & Wang, 1973.
- Barthes, R. *S/Z*. Paris : Editions du Seuil, 1970
- Dudek, D. "Desiring perception: Finding utopian impulses in Shaun Tan's 'The Lost Thing.'" *Papers*, 15:2, pp.58-66, 2005.
- Dudek, D. "Dogboys and lost things; or anchoring a floating signifier: Race and critical multiculturalism." *Ariel*, 37:4, pp.1-20, 2006.
- Li, C. *Mao's Last Dancer*. Camberwell: Viking/Penguin, 2003.
- Li, C. *Mao's Last Dancer*. Young Readers' Edition. Camberwell: Puffin Books, 2005.
- Li, C. *The Peasant Prince*. Camberwell: Viking/Penguin, 2007.
- Mallan, K. M. "Trash aesthetics and utopian memory: 'The Tip at the End of the Street' and 'The Lost Thing.'" *Bookbird*, 43 :1, pp.28-34, 2005.
- Tan, S. *The Lost Thing*. South Melbourne: Lothian Books, 2000.
- Tan, S. *The Arrival*. South Melbourne: Lothian Books, 2006.
- Tan, S. "Strangers in strange lands." *Viewpoint*, 14:4, pp. 4-7, 2008.
- Tan, S. (n.d.) "Picture books: Who are they for?" From Shaun Tan's website <http://www.shauntan.net/images/whypicbooks.pdf>, accessed 22 September, 2008.
- Yang, G. L. "Stranger in a strange land." Review of Shaun Tan, 'The Arrival'. *New York Times Book Review*, Nov. 11, p.21, 2007.

Wenche Ommundsen is Professor of English Literatures and Associate Dean for Research at the University of Wollongong, Australia. She has published widely on multicultural and diasporic literatures, with particular attention to writing from Asian diasporas. Her current research projects include a study of multiculturalism in children's literature, a survey of Asian-Australian literary interactions and, in collaboration with the Literature Board of the Australia Council for the Arts, the mapping of literary infrastructure in Australia.

¹ I owe some of these observations to the detective work of my colleague Debra Dudek (see Dudek 2005 and 2006).